Book Review: The wild West: The mythical cowboy and social theory

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Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage, 2001. vi + 205 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0–7619–5232–2 (hbk); ISBN 0–7619–5233–0 (pbk) £14.99

The Wild West appears to be another book reading the cowboy in terms of his mythic relevance to American self-understanding. However, Wright reverses the expected focus and concentrates on various understandings of the social contract using the cowboy and westerns to dramatize the relation of the individual to society in American life and institutions. From Hobbes and Adam Smith, through Marx, Weber and Durkheim, Wright takes us on an entertaining canter through different versions of theory relating to American market society, illustrating them through what he terms America's 'social myth of origin' (p. 1). In the last third of the book, he considers, in more of a gallop, the familiar intersections of myth and power by way of chapters on women, Native Americans and the environment.

As a work of cultural studies, *The Wild West* is an intriguing introduction to the central thinkers and issues that underlie our understanding of the emergence and maintenance of civil society. The existence of an open frontier was fulcral to American thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, as we might expect, but also to European thinkers such as Locke, for whom the availability of the wilderness (to white males) was necessary to his concepts of man (*sic*) and nature. Wright takes the reader patiently through various ways of thinking the individual and the market, sometimes too patiently and repetitively for the advanced reader, but the expository clarity means that this could serve as an excellent coursebook in social theory. Moreover, it is differentiated from more conventional treatments of these areas by the way he inflects the topics constantly with examples drawn from the myth of the frontier and the cowboy.

This use of the cowboy is much more than simply illustrative or supposedly student-friendly (indeed, film studies tells us of the unpopularity of the western among students nowadays), for Wright has a serious point to

make concerning the distinct ways in which myth diverges from the theory in its understanding of the questions. The consideration of social myths as a mode of understanding is a central plank in the development of cultural studies and Wright makes it repeatedly clear that mythic understanding is a necessary component of the ways in which American society processes the conflicts between the claims of the polity and the individual. Mythic understanding, as evidenced in the cowboy myth, is revealed as more responsive to the working out on the ground of the implications of the issues. To take one of the many examples, obvious to the myth, but not explicit in the theory: 'the myth remembers that the values of freedom and equality were always only intended to apply to white males' (p. 81).

The sections in Part 3 dealing with women, Native Americans and the environment inevitably come across as somewhat abbreviated. Taking the chapter 'Removing the Indians', for example, we are no more than shown the signposts towards some of the areas covered by the mythic resonances of Native Americans in American self-fashioning. This is territory that current Native American writers (whose approaches are barely touched on) and other unpackers of frontier myths such as Richard Slotkin or Patricia Limerick have handled increasingly impressively. Even in the form of this short synthesis, Wright is judicious and level-headed, despite the inflammatory nature of the problem (the problem, of course, is the invasion by Europeans), arriving at the crucial assertion that 'the myth always reminds us, as little else does, of the central importance of the image of the Indians to the development of modern society' (p. 171). Nonetheless, his enthusiasm for relating everything to market theory can become somewhat bracing, as in, for example: 'Slavery was only a problem in America because it contradicted the market, not because it contradicted equality' (p. 169). If there is one thing cultural studies does well it is to alert us to the multiple discourses operating athwart any area that we choose to isolate, as per Foucault's strictures concerning the uncoordinated, contradictory nature of the flows of power. Wright does this himself throughout this book in the playing off of theory and myth, which seems more profitable than totalizing the explanation for such a complex economic, but also mythic and emotional, issue as slavery. Yet, even this vein in his work performs a stimulating pedagogical function, for *The Wild West* attempts to explain the social theorists carefully and then to provoke by way of the cowboy/frontier/western myth. The explanations of the theory are full, while the references to westerns on film, for example, are often no more than notations, invitations to the reader to expand on the connections. In this light, codas to chapters listing relevant films could serve very well as indications for exercises or assignments.

Whatever the current resistance of students to westerns, Wright is correct to insist on their relevance to an understanding of the dynamics of American society, both in the past and at present. In their modulations of

the nature of individualism in relation to the market, they dramatize problems that the theory either ignores or leaves implicit. Moreover, their generic and moral features also inform other popular culture texts, so that both for students of social theory, as for students of popular culture, *The Wild West* offers an invigorating demonstration of the intersection of political science with cultural studies in ways that confirm the cowboy as, indeed, a core cultural icon.

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Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004. 362 pp. (inc. notes, bibliography and index). ISBN 0–8223–3280–9 (hbk) $84.95; ISBN 0–8223–3269–8 (pbk) $23.95

In *Utopia Limited* Marianne DeKoven, a self-described '1960s person', revisits several of the defining texts of that era to show that the 1960s represents simultaneously the culmination of modernist utopian impulses and a critical moment for the emergence of the postmodern. The book focuses upon the textual analysis of key 1960s texts, some of which are now all but forgotten, such as Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* and R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*, and some of which have become classics, such as Barthes' *Mythologies* and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*. (Neither Barthes' book, written in 1957, nor Venturi's from 1972, are literally from the 1960s but they are part of the 'structure of feeling' that defines the 1960s for DeKoven.) DeKoven's analysis reveals how 1960s modernism, the search for wholeness, authenticity and meaningfulness, expressed often in relation to the individual subject, conditions an emerging postmodernism that valorizes fragmentation, the local, the temporary and the diffuse. By discovering the roots of postmodernism in the moment of modernism's most ambitious expression, DeKoven is able to establish continuity between the utopian impulses of the 1960s and the seemingly post-utopian or anti-utopian postmodern era. The utopian desires of the 1960s are displaced in postmodernism, but they persist in a form she refers to as 'utopia limited'.

DeKoven selects texts that captured the *zeitgeist* of their day, particularly in the United States, but which, with notable exceptions, feel anachronistic now. And it is precisely the difference between modernism and postmodernism as defining 'structures of feeling' that concerns DeKoven. By bringing the issue of postmodernism to the centre of 1960s literature, DeKoven potentially shifts our understanding of both these texts and postmodernism. It is exciting, as well, just to revisit many of